

True sorrow not only takes away the sins of the past, it also strengthens us against falling in the future. For true contrition, we do not have to shed tears as the dying man in our story. But the heart must shed tears. May contrition, bring us to the joy of fully serving the Lord and keeping His law of love.

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The Value of Penitent Tears

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When I was a much younger man, I heard a story, which I have never forgotten. The account is of a dying man who was brought into a Catholic hospital. It seemed that he had lived a very sinful, unrepentant life. The attending nurse, a Sister of the order of the Saint Joseph placed a crucifix in the man's hand, half expecting that he would cast it aside. Instead, he eagerly clutched the crucifix and began to kiss the face of Christ again and again. The man begged the Sister to bring a priest to him. When the priest arrived, the man began to speak in broken phrases about how good God had been to him, and how ungrateful and disobedient he had been in return. Tears streamed from his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. The priest used one handkerchief after another to dry those tears of repentance.

Still weeping over his sins the man died and went to meet his Lord. The priest wondered how God would judge this man's soul. According to the story, the priest was privileged to see the man's judgment. He saw an angel put all the man's sins on one side of a huge scale. Little by little the scale went down and down, bearing the man's sinfulness. What could possible counterbalance this huge mountain of guilt? What could possibly make up for a life full of pride and sin?

Then the angel placed something on the empty side of the scale. It was one of the handkerchiefs, which the priest had used to

dry the tears of the dying man. Swiftly, that side of the scale descended, far outweighing the burden of sin on the other side.

Indeed, tears of heartfelt sorrow for sin, genuine contrition of heart, weighs more with God than years of sin. True contrition counterbalances any and all offences against the all-loving God. Here we see the value of contrition.

The Bible clearly speaks of the worth of repentance: "For the Lord your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him" (2 Chron. 30:9). "Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, that he may deliver their soul from death... (Ps 33:18-19). Also, "Yet to those who repent he grants a return, and he encourages those whose endurance is failing" (Sir. 17:24).

The Bible also tells the story of a woman, whom tradition identifies as Mary Magdalene. "And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment (Lk 7:37-38).

Jesus, the Compassionate, set her free; for it was for the fallen that He had come. From the moment of her freedom, she surrendered to Christ, she belonged to Him, and with deep and courageous love and devotion she followed Him to the bitter agony of Calvary and ever after.

Mary Magdalene was there when they laid Jesus' body in the tomb, it was she, along with the other women who returned the next morning with spices in order to anoint His body. It is a distraught Mary Magdalene that rushed away to tell Peter and John that the body of her beloved Savior had been stolen. Peter and John come and go, but Mary lingers there weeping. Her mind and heart filled with this latest sorrow, and her eyes dimmed with tears, she is not comforted by the angel but turns away to put her anguished question to the first person she sees - she thinks he is a gardener. "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" She doesn't even name Him; doesn't all of Jerusalem know who was laid in this tomb? "Sir, if you have removed him, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." "Mary," He says quietly; and the voice of the Good Shepherd who knows His own is enough to lift her from tragic sorrow to wild joy. She falls on her knees and once again clings to His feet, but He assures her He will not disappear. Jesus sends her to bear the great news of His resurrection to the apostles. What awe and joy is in her voice as she rushes in to the disconsolate group "I have seen the Lord!" So Mary Magdalene became the announcer of our joy, telling the good news of Christ's victory over sin and death. Whatever her later history may be, the story of Mary Magdalene as told in the Gospels is an impressive one. It is one of the greatest divine love stories of all time, following perfectly the definition of love.

We, in imitation of Mary Magdalene, must throw ourselves at the feet of Christ

and beg for His forgiveness for all the offences we have committed against His dignity. Sorrow for sin is so powerful, that we must strive with every fiber of our being to have genuine contrition. We must understand that while every sin is an offense the majesty of almighty God, some sins are mortal (1 John 5:16).

If a sin is of serious consequence, and committed with full knowledge and consent, then we have completely turned away from God, we have committed a mortal sin. Is there anything in heaven or earth that can make up for such disobedience? Yes, there is a way. There is only one way, it is abject sorrow of heart.

If we could only see the suffering of the unrepentant sinners in Gehenna. In Gehenna, there is only pure hatred and agony. If it were possible, the soul would tear the flesh from its body because of self-hatred. These are the sinners who have put off contrition, those who refuse to beg for forgiveness. These are the sinners who were too proud or too hardened or too selfish or too stubborn to awaken sorrow in their sinful souls.

Yet, true repentance should stem from love of God and not fear of retribution. We must find our way to the foot of the Cross. There we join Mary, the sinner and Mary, the sinless. Look up at His broken body, suffering to pay the debt of our sins, on that tree of shame. Sin did that, your sin and mine. See, also, His heart bursting with love for you and me. "When you go to confession," said Saint John Vianney, "you must understand what you are about to do; you are about to un-nail our Lord."